



Unknown author

Pau Maria Turull Fournols en la playa de Hondarribia, Guipúzcoa, September 1918
Arxiu Històric de Sabadell, Fons Pau Maria Turull Fournols, Sabadell

THE DOMESTIC CAMERA

AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHY
IN CATALONIA
(ca. 1880–1936)

15.02–12.05.2024

In 1839, creators and promoters of photography enthusiastically hailed the fact that among the key characteristics of the new invention, which was based on earlier research and procedures but also on the amateur practice of art, was the fact that the technical features of the photographic camera allowed for its universal use.

Nonetheless, mass access to the new medium did not become a reality until the late 19th century, which saw a veritable explosion of amateur home photography due to the invention of the gelatin silver negative, the proliferation of a photography industry aimed at a broad range of users, and the acceptance of the presence of the camera in different contexts and at different life moments. From that point on the discipline abandoned the hand-crafted paradigm and aligned itself with the logics of industrial production and consumption. The camera became one more accessory of modern life, generating its own visual culture, which preferably focused on the self, the family, social groups based on shared interests, and the different imaginaries prevailing at this period. The result was the birth of an unprecedented visual grammar of the personal sphere.

In Catalonia, the new interest in photography took firm hold from the 1880s, generating enormous public enthusiasm until the outbreak of the Civil War in the summer of 1936. Businesses, the press and cultural entities, as well as individuals of different social classes, genders and ages, all avidly applied themselves to it, either as mere enthusiasts or as what were known at the time as “amateurs”, whose photographic practice was more ambitious.

The camera entered the domestic realm of thousands of people and from then on contributed to moulding ways of apprehending reality and to expressing the social and cultural aspirations of the day. As it unfolds this exhibition will reveal how, far from being a popular but unsophisticated and insignificant cultural form, images taken with a non-professional camera condensed innumerable social signs, practical aims and aesthetic references. These are amateur photographs which, despite originating in specific domestic contexts, are the result of collective imaginaries, themes and visual conventions, which is precisely why they merit our attention.

A NEW PASTIME TAKES ROOT

Different types of amateur photographers existed from the outset. Due to the replacement of the early photographic techniques with the new collodion wet plate process, in Catalonia in the 1860s optical equipment shops and professional photographers began to sell the earliest domestic-use cameras, such as the French Dubroni, and also offer the first classes for amateurs, “young ladies” and children.

In the early 1880s and in parallel to a new international market for photographic material, a shift of interest emerged that is reflected in a series of cultural and commercial initiatives. Firstly, this period saw the founding of both the first amateur photography clubs and the earliest Catalan excursionist groups, which soon developed a marked interest in photography. This was the case with the Centre Excursionista de Catalunya (1890) and with the numerous groups established in Barcelona and other towns and cities. Secondly, commerce and advertising also played a key role in the consolidation of the new activity. An entire network of specialist shops and photography departments in large department stores appeared in a relatively short space of time, in addition to an influential publishing sector of specialist magazines. Numbering nearly a dozen titles, it made Catalonia an epicentre of photography in Spain. A new activity was taking root which brought together widely differing users and multiple aspirations.

A TRANSVERSAL CAMERA

People of different social classes, genders and ages took up photography. Nonetheless, profound cultural differences were in fact concealed beneath the appearance of a single interest and a very homogeneous iconography. In its transversal nature the use of the camera differed widely according to the possibilities, expectations and limitations of each social category, given that different constructs and ways of apprehending reality conditioned the individuals taking photographs and their *modus operandi*.

The initial profile of the photographer was a middle-class man with money and free time who embraced the new technique with some enthusiasm. He embodied the prototype of the serious amateur whose interest in photography was other socio-cultural class values, such as those of nation, family and high culture.

The practice of photography also took hold among middle- and upper-class women and children, firstly due to the marketing of cameras that were cheaper and easier to use, such as the successful Vest Pocket and Brownie made by Kodak, and secondly to the consolidation of a discourse which associated taking snapshots with moments of leisure and family happiness. Children, teenagers and mothers could thus all take on the role of visual chroniclers of their family.

Finally, the working class could also access the new activity, often through working men's clubs and cultural associations. The installation of simple, self-operated photographic labs was a priority for many of these entities, which aimed to encourage interest in photography among male workers and to a lesser extent among female ones. Photography was favoured as a route to accessing the fields of art and culture, in a way similar to the promotion of literature or the theatre.

LOCAL VISIONS

Amateur photography took a decisive step forward with the appearance of the new gelatin silver emulsion, which made it possible to take snapshots. This led to the use of the camera outdoors and photographers thus started to take images of the people, places and events happening around them. The camera became an accessory of the eye of the passer-by, who could now project an active, curious and furtive gaze on surrounding reality and thus become a type of local photographic chronicler.

A clear difference exists between the gaze cast by the camera on the rural world and the manner of capturing the urban scene. Observation of the rural space, at that period in decline, tended to centre on traditional ways of life, while focus on the urban environment was stimulated by some of the changes associated with modernity: the transformation of cities or events such as the International Exhibition of 1929 are good examples of this. With the increase of the migrant population in cities such as Barcelona a new “miserabilist” gaze on “the other” emerged, characterised by an emphasis on photographing workers, street sellers, members of the gypsy community (particularly women), and the children who lived in shacks on the city’s beaches. In this case the camera was partly activated by asymmetrical relations between the photographer and the subject. The local gaze also focused, albeit to a lesser extent, on the political conflicts that were erupting on the streets and photographing them was a way of bearing witness. Rural and urban settings shared various recurrent themes, including crowds on the streets and in markets, and celebrations such as the major religious festivals or fairs, which became particular subjects of interest to amateur photographers.

PHOTOGRAPHY, NATURE AND NATION

In the late 19th century, European nationalist sentiments converged with the rise of so-called excursionism for scientific, sporting and tourism purposes and the popularisation of photography. The latter soon became associated with scientific and recreational observation and knowledge of nature and the countryside, resulting in the triad of photography, nature and nation. This can be explained by the fact that the depiction of rural places, with their inhabitants and local customs, helped to construct a synthetic image of the nation; a crucial political issue for the consolidation of modern nation states. At the same time, the exercise of contemplating one's surroundings became increasingly linked to the act of visually representing them.

What began as a scientific practice through the first excursionist groups soon became a widespread form of leisure in Catalan society, contributing to the growing enthusiasm for photography. Visiting a series of natural locations, towns, villages and architectural remains thus became an accepted practice and these motifs acquired the status of icons through a convergence of political, historical and religious discourses and economic interests, often based on private initiatives, at just the moment when tourism within Spain was first appearing.

This link between photography, nature and nation acquired a different meaning in working men's clubs and associations, which also promoted excursionism but in this case as a group activity on non-working days. Underlying excursionism was the desire to shake off the oppressive yoke of the industrial city and the manner of using the camera related to that desire and those aspirations, in which companionship and contact with nature seemed to transport the working class to a pre-industrial state and a rural world from which the majority of its participants originated.

THE GLOBE-TROTTING CAMERA

The imaginary of a liberal nation is paralleled by the emergence of a cosmopolitan type of citizen. Just as the camera accompanied and expressed the experiences of photographers across the length and breadth of the imagined nation, it did the same for international travel, which replicated the idea of a pre-established itinerary. The camera not only accompanied tourists around the Balearic Islands, northern Spain and Andalusia, but also through France, Switzerland, Germany and England. Going south and towards the Middle East, the principal destinations were Morocco and Egypt, while finally a less frequent destination was the Far East, including China and Japan. There was also a smaller amount of travel to the United States and Central and South America, primarily for business reasons and for social and cultural exchanges.

Due to the expense of trips of this type it is clear that the globe-trotting camera was largely the possession of the wealthy social class. There are, however, some exceptions, such as those enthusiasts and amateurs who enjoyed a certain socio-economic position and were members of bodies such as the Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular or the Centre Autonomista de Dependents del Comerç i de la Indústria, both of which also organised group trips around northern Europe and the Balearic Islands and published the resulting images in their respective bulletins. In the case of less wealthy photographers, the impossibility of travelling and photographing abroad was compensated by the purchase of photographs of other countries.

PHOTOGRAPHY AT HOME

With the consolidation of amateur photography, the tradition of the family photographic portrait shifted from being a professional product to a self-produced one taken with a domestic camera. Within the personal realm, and particularly from the subjective, bourgeois viewpoint, the family constituted the primary social space and logically become one of the favourite subjects for this new hobby. The family portrait fulfilled the function of certifying the existence of people, the place they occupied within the family and their evolution over the years, while also passing on their memory to future generations. Hence the fact that with the exception of the youngest members of the household (who were frequently photographed alone), family photographs were generally group ones and expressed union.

The family portrait adopted different representational formats, settings and moments. The genre shifted from portraiture in the strictest sense to the picturesque presentation of the more or less everyday actions of each of the family's members. The home was one of the most habitual settings. Photographs had to be taken in areas near light sources, such as windows and balconies, or in open spaces including courtyards and roof terraces. Despite an exclusive visual focus on individuals belonging to the family and its circle of friends, the camera also (sometimes unintentionally) captured the presence and labour of the women employed in the house.

“HAPPY MOMENTS”

Photography firms used a range of incentives to promote interest in the new technology, one of which was fundamental as without it, happy and unique moments could be lost forever. Fostered by associations relating to memory, the result was the emergence of one of the distinctive traits of amateur, home photography, namely the possibility of depicting enjoyable leisure moments among family and friends. This was primarily made possible by the invention of the gelatin silver negative from which snapshots could be produced. Amateurs could thus capture the expressions, gestures and actions of the members of their social circle with relative ease.

The new relationship established between the camera and leisure ran parallel to an increase in free time and to new amusements associated with summer holidays, health and entertainment. Lengthy periods on the coast or in the mountains, bathing, amusement parks and sport were added to the traditional forms of leisure such as Sunday strolls or the culture of games. In turn, photography became another form of entertainment which augmented the experience of the new forms of leisure that aimed to captivate and stimulate the senses and emotions; the act of photographing contributed to channelling the excitement and wonder provoked by amusements of this type.

PHOTOGRAPHY, GAMES AND THEATRE

In some cases the amusement depicted was not the result of the activity taking place in front of the camera but rather the one produced by its presence. Laughter, funny faces, acrobatic movements, somersaults, imitation of sportsmen (such as boxers), recreation of scenes from fiction (the punisher and his victim, stabbings and accidents), or more directly the imitation of Hollywood stars configured an iconographic universe generated by the very presence of the camera and by the connotations and theatricality associated with it.

As a result, and in addition to being a device that captured images for their mere contemplation, as the record of a moment or to preserve memory, the domestic camera played possessed a role of entertainment and subversion. It can be considered an “active” machine in that its presence generated a new space within the existing one, allowing for informal and even alternative behavioural acts, attitudes and interactions, given that they seemingly moved away from reality and entered the realm of visual fiction. Particularly notable in this context are the photographs taken by young children. The new pastime was practised as a game and above all carried out among equals, in other words in the company of the other children of the family or with the approval of the adults, who temporarily suspended their codes of conduct.

THE (IN)DISCREET CAMERA

One of the distinctive features of amateur, home photography is that it allows for the self-production of images; in other words, a single person could be in charge of the entire photographic process, from taking the image to its subsequent development and the production of the paper print. This encouraged the emergence of an intimate iconography of a sexual nature, concealed from the gaze and the judgment of third parties. In this context, the camera reflected different roles and above all different gazes. In this space of intimacy and with the premise that the domestic camera was intended for private use and consumption, pacts were formed between the photographer and the subject which did not always involve a symmetrical relationship. In collections belonging to middle-class photographers it is evident that the stereoscopic image of the female nude is a subject as common as that of family portraits and views that reflected an idea of nation. These visual representations are very close to their pictorial equivalent, in which the woman, who knows herself to be observed, acts in conformance with the presence of the external gaze, in a mode of “display”. The domestic camera allowed for representations and self-representations that are not always normative. While examples from Catalonia are still rare, they reveal other ways of making gender and sexuality issues visible which had no place in the public sphere of the time, such as the representation of homoerotic affection and self-exploration of the body.

KBr

Fundación **MAPFRE**

Barcelona Photo Center